

Farmers markets growing out of season

by [Bridget Macdonald](#)
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Andy Wright and his son Timothy got on the road to Chicago a little behind schedule that cold Saturday morning. “We were running late,” Timothy said. “We usually try to leave by 3:30 a.m.” Fortunately, the father and son from Hart, Mich. had prepared for their trip the night before.

Instead of suitcases, the Wrights packed coolers with prime cuts of grass-fed pork for the first day of Green City Market’s winter season. The 10-year-old farmers market usually shuts in November, but beginning this January is open on the first and third Saturday of every month through spring, sheltered within the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum in Lincoln Park.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, farmers markets are growing steadily, with 26 percent more nationwide in 2008 than in 2004. In Illinois, growth is even more impressive. Over the past five years, the number of farmers markets in the state has increased by 67 percent. Delayne Reeves, Illinois’s marketing representative for the USDA, said her agency does not keep track of how many of the markets stay open in winter, but that there is sustained demand for local food year round and a drive to connect producers with consumers.

While many small producers sell to restaurants, caterers and stores during the winter, participating in a year-round market enables them to expand their client base and nurture relationships with existing customers. Harry Carr of Mint Creek Farm said he is glad to have face-to-face interaction with consumers during the winter. If nothing else, he said, “it gets us out of the lambing barn.”

In the museum’s South Gallery, a flock of cooks prepared for the opening culinary event within a corral of banquet tables. The “Snout to Tail” tasting showcased pork from market vendors prepared by chefs from local restaurants.

Between bites of pulled pork made with shoulder from vendor Twin Oak Meats, Lee Ann Soble, 62, said she rarely eats meat, and never buys it anywhere other than at Green City. With the opening of the year-round market, she will have more access to locally produced food during the winter months. “My husband just got some lamb necks from Mint Creek to make stew,” Soble noted.

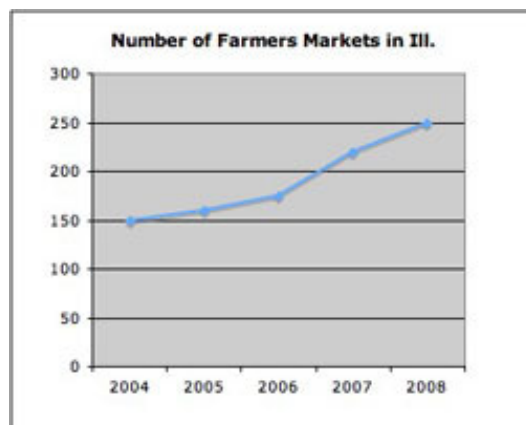
At \$7 per pound, the lamb from Carr’s Mint Creek Farm was comparable in price to grass-fed lamb shoulder from the Whole Foods Market on North Ashland Avenue, where it was priced at \$6.99 per pound on Jan. 20.

Although Carr has considered selling his meats at Whole Foods or through a Community Supported Agriculture cooperative - an arrangement that has become common practice among fruit and vegetable producers - he said now that the winter market is open, “Customers can come here and get what they want, when they want, without a long-term commitment.”



Bridget Macdonald/MEDILL

The four moveable greenhouses farm manager Mike Bollinger built at Heritage Prairie Farm, in Elburn have allowed him to extend his growing season into the cold winter months.



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Illinois is fertile ground for farmers markets, according to the local office of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The state began tracking the trend in 1999.

